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**ETHNIC CONFLICT:
IMPERATIVES FOR US MILITARY STRATEGY**

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It is certainly no secret that American military strategists were roughly ejected from their comfort zones by the end of the Cold War. After decades of being securely anchored by the all-consuming struggle between democracy and communism, such individuals were suddenly cut loose from their bipolar moorings by the Soviet collapse. Since then it seems US military strategists have been uncomfortably adrift, anxiously examining the new world order for a defining context to frame American military strategy. Recent fighting in Bosnia, Central Africa and Kosovo seems to provide this context. Such outbreaks of internecine fighting present compelling evidence that ethnic warfare will be a major source of conflict in the new millennium. Therefore, if 21st century American military thinkers are to craft a successful strategy, they must address the imperatives of ethnic conflict.

To understand the ramifications of ethnic conflict for future US military strategies one must look first to the source of such conflict. Examining two of the current schools of thought on conflict in the new millennium simplifies this task. This first comes from Harvard professor Samuel Huntington. According to his hypothesis, the next wellspring of international conflict will be "the great divisions among humankind and the dominating sources of conflict will be cultural."¹ While Huntington believes nation-states will remain powerful actors in world affairs, he feels the struggle between civilizations will result in future battles on a global scale.²

Other futurists find Huntington implausible and propose a countermanding theory which essentially asserts the dominance of the status quo. This camp argues that traditional nation-states will remain the dominant actors in world affairs. They believe the preponderance of 21st century conflict will continue to emanate as a byproduct of

nation-state politics. For example, a 1995 article in the *Economist* claims the problem with Professor Huntington's civilization-unit theory is that the component parts of the larger groupings are profoundly reluctant to surrender their separate identities.³ While they concede that Huntington's massive zones of civilization may at first be feasible, at the end of the day, it is the mechanisms of traditional nation-state power which will continue to provide the essential security umbrella under which people group. Simply put, this second school of thought maintains the glue which binds nation-states, is stronger than the glue which binds civilizations.⁴

While both sides present strong cases, neither Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis or the *Economist's* "continuing relevance of the nation-state" antithesis seems entirely correct. Instead, a new strain of conflict will be formed from a synthesis of these two concepts. The result of this union is cultural conflict and the source of such conflict is a geopolitical unit most appropriately thought of as an "ethnic-state." Examining the recent fighting in Bosnia reveals how ethnic-states form and why they will be a source of conflict commanding the attention of future US military strategists.

Once the strong-armed idealism of Soviet communism was removed from the Balkans, an immediate struggle erupted among three ethnocentric groups vying to establish dominance in Bosnia. In a manner strikingly familiar to Huntington's clash of civilization theory, each of the factions attempted to gain support for their efforts by depicting the fight as the opening salvo in a global war to protect their larger cultural identities. The Bosnian Muslims invoked pan-Arabism to garner support from Islamic countries. The Serbs fanned the flames of Orthodox nationalism to gain assistance from

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the Slavic world. And finally, the Croats, depicting themselves as the dam holding back the combined Muslim/Orthodox flood, looked to the non-Slavic West for help

While these developments seem at first to validate Huntington's theory, actual events on the battlefield proved otherwise. In 1994, a combined ground offensive launched by the Croats and Muslims reoccupied many of the enclaves previously captured by the Serbs. As military setbacks mounted, it became apparent that Serbian nationalism was not strong enough to overcome local political and military realities. The Serbs' main sponsors, Yugoslavia and Russia, failed to aid their cultural brothers, in effect saying their individual state interests outweighed the need to support a larger struggle of culturalism idealism. Cut off from their sponsors, the Serbs finally relented and signed the Dayton Accords. Likewise, the call for pan-Arab nationalism failed to ignite the so-called Islamic bomb and the Bosnia Muslims opted to sign the Dayton plan. Finally, the Croats never garnered support from the Western powers whose priority concern was in preventing a larger Balkan conflagration.⁵ Faced with this reality, the Croats also capitulated to the Dayton agreement.

Because of these outcomes, the Dayton Accords at first seem a defeat of Huntington's thesis and a reaffirmation of the viability of nation-state politics. By agreeing to the accords, the warring factions apparently accepted a political settlement which would in theory reunite Bosnia as a traditional nation-state. Things however were not this straightforward. Despite Dayton's lofty goals of reconciliation, what has actually occurred in Bosnia is the creation of three new culturally segregated ethnic-states. While these geopolitical units may have given up their quest to expand the conflict into a global cultural crusade, they are still firmly committed to using all their elements of state power

to wage cultural separatism on a local level. This hardcore commitment to using the elements of state power to preserve cultural integrity is the fundamental difference between ethnic-states and nation-states. More importantly, because they vehemently embrace this ethnocentric desire to aggressively promote their cultural identity, at least on a local level, ethnic-states constitute one of the principal conflict generators in the next century. Therefore, it becomes imperative that future American military strategists understand and accommodate the implications of ethnic-state conflict.

Theoretical Imperatives

Typically the military strategy formulation process is absent abstract theoretical discussions. However, theory yields the principles which form the underpinnings of any effective military strategy. Thus, it becomes necessary for the military strategists to have a firm theoretical grasp of warfare. This is particularly relevant when examining a military strategy designed to respond to ethnic motivated conflict. Some military thinkers claim post Cold War conflict invalidates the great Clausewitzian theoretical dictum which claims that war, being an act of policy, will be modified in practice thus preventing it from reaching violent extremes.⁶ For instance in his 1993 book *A History of Warfare*, British historian John Keegan boldly refutes Clausewitz by claiming in the first sentence of his opening chapter that "war is not the continuation of policy by other means."⁷ According to Keegan's reasoning, warfare is not policy, but is instead an inbred cultural trait. He concludes that civilization groups which have a warlike cultural ethos are eventually doomed to fight themselves to extinction because they have no moral, intellectual or technical mechanism of constraint within their cultures.⁸

Upon first inspection, ethnic conflict, with its penchant for unrestrained practices such as ethnic cleansing and genocide, seems to support Keegan's thesis. Such clashes, inspired by centuries-long animosities and punctuated by totalitarian human slaughter indeed seem to lack the moderations in practice which Clausewitz believed would occur since war is a continuation of policy. However, closer inspection reveals ethnic conflict actually validates Clausewitz and not Keegan. To understand this assertion, one must examine Clausewitz's paradoxical trinity which he purports represents the three basic elements of war. These are passion, which mainly concerns the people, chance, the realm of the commander and his armies, and reason, the business of the government.⁹

Of these three characteristics, understanding the first is the most important to the strategist if he is to comprehend modern ethnic conflict. As was detailed earlier, an ethnic-state differs from a nation-state in that it uses the mechanisms of state power primarily to promote cultural purity. Since culture deals with the attainments and learned behavior patterns of a specific group of people, ethnic-state conflict is therefore weighted heavily toward the people side of Clausewitzian trinity.¹⁰ In this realm, according to Clausewitz, the human passions of primordial violence, hatred and enmity combine to superheat the flames of war. Once this conflagration is ignited, Clausewitz warns war can hasten toward the theoretical absolutes of complete annihilation.¹¹

This becomes a key principle in the understanding of ethnic based conflict. That is, if left unchecked, ethnic conflict carries the potential to reach theoretical absolutes on a local level. Dr Pauletta Otis, an acknowledged expert in the study of ethnic conflict, confirms this finding. According to her research, an alleged final solution for ethnic conflict is not a political settlement but a euphemism really meaning that ethnic cleansing

or genocide has taken place.¹² Fortunately, although it tilts toward excessive degrees of passion, cultural conflict is still demonstratively Clausewitzian in nature and responds to reason under the correct conditions. That is why ethnic conflict, while it can be excessive on a local level, does not continue to spread out of control on a global scale. More importantly, as proved by the Dayton agreement, under the proper conditions, the passions of the people can be made subservient to the reason of the government. But as Bosnia also demonstrates, such a result will only occur if an arbitrator intervenes with the ability to separate the combatants. Without intervention, ethnic warfare will proceed toward unrestrained extremes.¹³

It is because ethnic conflict can spiral toward such absolutes that the United States will continue to feel a moral imperative to become involved in these wars. Questions of US vital national interest aside, American presence in Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo demonstrates the US will intervene to prevent the horrendous slaughter which would occur if it chose not to do so. Of importance to the military strategists in this discussion is that the intervention which the US offers as an alternate to "final solutions" like genocide invariably involves the military. Hence, there is a theoretical based reason which dictates the US military must have a coherent strategy for intervention in ethnic wars.

Doctrinal Imperatives

If the study of the theoretical implications of ethnic conflict reveals to the strategist why US forces will engage, the next logical step is to determine how forces should accomplish such engagements. In doing so, the strategist transitions to doctrine which constitutes the process of translating theoretical truisms into broad expressions of how

services will accomplish their missions. In making this intellectual transition from words to action, one finds the emergence of ethnic based conflict will require some fundamental changes in the doctrinal constructs which currently guide US military actions.

A snapshot summary which best embodies current US warfighting doctrine is found in the US Army's Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*. According to this capstone document, the American concept of modern warfare is quick, decisive victory with minimum casualties.¹⁴ Appealing in its promise of near bloodless victories achieved in days if not hours, the Army phrase has become a kind of prime directive which guides the conduct of all US military action. Unfortunately, while this concept appeared realistic in the euphoric days following Desert Storm, it becomes untenable when juxtaposed against the realities of ethnic-state conflict.

This happens because concepts like "quick", "decisive" and "victory" are unrealistic when it comes to US intervention in the wars of ethnic-states. For instance, victory, as used in FM 100-5, implies the use of overwhelming combat superiority to defeat enemy forces. However, as mentioned in the previous theoretical discussion, US objectives in ethnic interventions will not involve winning in the traditional sense. Again, Dr Otis offers some thinking which clarifies this point. As she states, intervention in ethnic violence will be rather nuanced for the US military. She believes winning will equate to "the reestablishment of peaceful interactions and the invention of new interactions and processes which build on traditional patterns which result in an acceptable level of violence."¹⁵

As evidenced by Bosnia, Northern Ireland and elsewhere, achieving this acceptable level of violence will require defusing the situation by partitioning not only territory but

also sovereignty itself¹⁶ Only in this manner will the US be able to force a cooling off period which will short circuit the white-hot passions which lead to the horrors of localized ethnic cleansing and genocide However, such interventions are completely incompatible with a quick and decisive doctrine of warfare Since cultural warfare incorporates so much deep-seated passion, these cooling off periods will be protracted An effective doctrine must promulgate perseverance and persistence or else the US will end up spending blood and treasure only to postpone the reckoning between belligerents until American troops go home.¹⁷

The bottom line for the military strategist is that a successful military strategy for combating cultural based warfare must address this temporal element If peacekeeping missions in places like Cyprus and the Sinai are any precursor, and they almost certainly are, the US must develop a military strategy which incorporates a strategy of protracted intervention This is not the radical departure it may at first seem As mentioned, US forces already have experience in ever lengthening peacekeeping missions They are also in the process of experiencing long-term partitioning missions in Iraq and Bosnia Additionally, although US warfighting doctrine still advertises short, sharp victories as the American way of war, recent changes to doctrinal manuals also feature guidance for Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) While this represents a significant intellectual step, the limited MOOTW doctrine falls far short of that which will be required to adequately address protracted cultural interventions Writing such doctrine and institutionalizing it into the mainstream of US military and political thinking must be a key task if future American military strategists are to successfully cope with the demands of ethnic-state warfare

Force Structure Imperatives

After determining how ethnic-state violence should alter US military doctrine, the final step for the strategists is to consider the implications for American military force structure. As discussed previously, to successfully cope with the long-term ramifications of ethnic conflict, the strategist must conceive an expansive doctrine which includes not only the idea of quick, decisive warfare, but also a longer lasting, less clear cut form of protracted intervention. The logical question then arises: what type of force structure does one need to support such a doctrine? To correctly answer this question, military strategists must promote fundamental alterations to current US military force structure.

America currently has its military arrayed to support a strategy which calls for fighting two near simultaneous major theater wars (MTW) while also conducting concurrent smaller-scale contingencies.¹⁸ Obviously writing a new national military strategy to replace the two-MTW scenario is beyond the scope of this essay. Rather the intent is to argue the emergence of ethnic conflict dictates certain broad force structure imperatives which military strategists must incorporate into future US military strategies.

For instance, by using the two-NMS strategy as a force structure template, military programmers have created a mobile, technology reliant, conventional military force. This concept places the vast bulk of US front-line combat power in the active duty forces while most of the combat support infrastructure resides in guard and reserve units. While this force mix made sense using the two MTW scenario, it is inappropriate to deal with ethnic-state conflict. Certainly the need to keep a robust combat force in the active duty military is still an imperative for the foreseeable future. Although current trends indicate conflict in the upcoming millennium will be heavily populated by low-simmering ethnic

conflicts, the Saddam Husseins of the world, along with possible emerging military peers like China, still necessitate a strong active duty US conventional capability. Such a force will also have its place in combating ethnic conflict. For instance the combat heavy implementation force (IFOR) initially inserted into Bosnia prevented military challenges from recalcitrant factions of the rival combatants.

However, while conventional combat forces can be of use in countering and controlling ethnic violence they are too asymmetric to be lastingly effective. To illustrate this point one can again look at Bosnia where the combat orientated IFOR has given way to the Stabilization Force (SFOR). This evolution occurred because a force designed for rapid, decisive military operations is anathema to the force needed for a long-term stabilization mission. Thus, while IFOR was necessary until the intensity of passions cooled, it is SFOR which has the mission of keeping the peace until a more lasting solution takes effect. Rather than combat orientated, forces during the extended stabilization phase must be more constabulary, diplomatic and humanitarian in their composition. This is necessary because during stabilization the worst of the wanton violence may have subsided, but the ethnic-state governments can be expected to continue to push their agendas in a less violent manner. In this environment, US military forces will, among other missions, arbitrate "neighborhood squabbles", provide humanitarian assistance and look to rebuilding infrastructure.

Forces tailored for these missions must contain large contingents of military police or like-trained troops skilled in non-lethal intervention tactics. Likewise, those troops possessing linguist skills and cultural knowledge will be invaluable. Military lawyers will be important as questions of international law, constitutional rights and rules of

engagement are continually debated. Civil engineers will be at an absolute premium as infrastructure damaged during the violent phases of the conflict is reconstructed. Additionally, since the state owned media would use jaundiced reporting to promote its policies, soldiers skilled in information operations will be tasked to counter such inflammatory rhetoric. While this is an abbreviated rundown of the skills needed by protracted intervention forces, it is adequate to convey the imperative that military skills, other than those associated with traditional combat missions, will become paramount.

Again, while the intent here is not to rewrite the US national military strategy, it is readily apparent the current two-MTW strategy is inadequate to combat ethnic conflict. For instance in the current Army force make-up, 97 percent of civil affairs units, 81 percent of the psychological operations units and 66 percent of military police battalions are in the Guard and Reserves.¹⁹ Similar distributions of non-combat forces are found in the other US military branches. This organization highlights an institutional flaw in current military force structure. If protracted intervention is to be successful, some reversal of the force structure mix between active duty forces and the reserve component has to take place. The non-combat skills necessary for successfully waging campaigns of cultural intervention should be moved to the active duty rolls where they can be accessed quickly and stay on station for extremely long periods of time.

Additionally, while recasting active and reserve forces is a sweeping change, it is merely a first step. A truly effective protracted intervention force will require not only non-combat military forces but also governmental and non-governmental forces beyond the military. For instance during Support Hope, the Rwanda humanitarian relief operation, it was non-governmental relief organizations (NGOs) which did much of the

front line work with the refugees while US military forces took the background role of providing logistic “surge” operations. Military strategists must devise a force structure which promotes such synergistic arrangements between military and non-military forces. The May 1997 Presidential Decision Directive-56 (PDD-56) constitutes the groundwork for this task. PDD-56 details the forces needed for managing complex contingency operations. As the directive correctly summarizes, success in complex contingency operations requires that all aspects of the crisis—diplomatic, political, security, humanitarian, economic—must be addressed in a simultaneously, coordinated fashion.²⁰ Bringing PDD-56 from concept to reality must be a primary task for military strategists if they are to find lasting force structure solutions for combating ethnic conflict.

Conclusion

The preceding pages argue that ethnic conflict must be seriously addressed in future US military strategies. This is not to say that ethnocentric warfare should be the sole focus of American military strategy because surely traditional nation-state conflict will continue to threaten US interests into the foreseeable future. It is also not the purpose here to prescribe in exacting detail a United States military strategy for the new millennium. Instead, the intent is to frame the issue. That is, to provide military strategists with the broad, theoretical, doctrinal and force sizing imperatives of ethnic conflict. From these imperatives they should conclude that ethnic conflict, since it consists of deep-seated human passion, can only be countered with a protracted stabilization force skilled in constabulary, diplomatic and humanitarian techniques. Such a force must play a prominent role in future US military strategies if the US is to cope with the proliferation of ethnic conflict.

Obviously making such changes will be an emotional and difficult undertaking, "Opening a large, successful, and complex organization [like the US military] to fundamental change is deeply difficult under any circumstances, there are always many good reasons not to question the essential traditions embodied in evolved force structure."²⁰ Even so, as evidenced by the burgeoning ethnic warfare which permeates Eastern Europe and Africa, this brand of conflict will almost certainly be a permanent and prominent feature on the future geopolitical landscape. Therefore, US military strategists must find the intellectual courage to accept ethnic conflict as reality and incorporate this change into their future calculations.

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22.

² Ibid.

³ Anonymous, "The nation-state is dead. Long live the nation-state." *The Economist* 337, no. 7946 (1995): 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Susan Rosegrant and Michael D. Watkins, "Getting to Dayton: Negotiating an End to the War in Bosnia," Kennedy School of Government Case Program, C125-96-1356 C (1996), 1-55.

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 78-83.

⁷ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1993), 3.

⁸ Ibid., 389.

⁹ Clausewitz, 89.

¹⁰ Funk & Wagnalls Standard Desk Dictionary (1986), s.v. culture.

¹¹ Clausewitz, 580.

¹² Paulette Otis, "Ethnic Conflict: What Kind of War Is This?" (unpublished manuscript), Fall 1998, 9.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of the Army, *FM 100-5 Operations* (Washington D.C.: US Army, 1985), 1-3.

¹⁵ Otis, 9.

¹⁶ Michael Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?" *Survival*, Winter 1998-99, 10.

¹⁷ Richard K. Betts, "Power, Prospects, and Priorities, Choices for Strategic Change" *Naval College Review*, vol. L, no. 1, (1997): 16.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, "National Military Strategy of the United States of America: Shape, Respond, Prepare Now. A Military Strategy for a New Era" (1997), 2.

¹⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Reserve Component Programs, March 1998 Report of the Reserve Forces Policy Board*, 7-12.

²⁰ Presidential Decision Directive-56, *Handbook for Interagency Management of Complex Contingency Operations*, 13 August 1998, 1-21.

²¹ Betts, 20.